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The Missionary Age:



A

HALF-CENTURY DISCOURSE,

BY

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SERMON.

GALATIANS 17. 4.

WHEN THE FULLNESS OF THE TIME WAS COME, GOD SENT FORTH HIS SON.

THE time here mentioned was that appointed for Messiah's advent. When the preliminaries and preparations were all completed, and every thing was ready in the world and the Jewish church, and all indicated the period for the coming of the Messiah, then he came and made the long promised atonement for the sins of mankind.

This was the most important of three grand prophetic epochs. The liberation of the enslaved church from Egypt was one. The return of the captive church from Babylon was another. But the coming of the Messiah formed an epoch of far greater interest. All the ceremonial institutions, types and shadows looked to his advent and death, and there found their meaning and termination, and so did the whole Levitical priesthood. The old dispensation of the law ended, and the new dispensation of the gospel commenced. And it was this grand epoch, this 'fullness of the time,' that prophets and kings so earnestly desired to see.

But there is another predicted epoch, another 'fullness of the time,' yet to come, of the highest

possible interest, when the Spirit shall be poured out upon all flesh, with a universal, overpowering influence, and "the kingdoms of this world" shall become "the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." To this fourth grand epoch the Christian church is now looking forward with the same earnest desire and expectation, that the ancient church did to the coming of the Messiah. As there was a "*fullness* of the time" for the one, so is there for the other; and the latter has its preliminaries, preparations, and appropriate signs, equally with the former. The probable ends, moreover, to be answered by a delay during so many centuries, would be found remarkably alike in both cases; and we should come to the conclusion that if there were signs to justify that general expectation of the Messiah, which seems to have pervaded the civilized world just before his advent, then the Christian world is now justified in expecting the universal extension of the gospel as an event near at hand.

Instead, however, of tracing this analogy through eighteen hundred years, (which would require a volume,) I shall confine myself to the half-century just completed, as a topic befitting the occasion when we stand midway between the beginning of the century and its close.

At the opening of the present century, our nation was mourning the death of Washington, and Europe was entering that terrible tempest of fire and blood, in which the genius of Napoleon was so conspicuous. The spirit of infidelity was every where abroad creating alarm; and little did good men,

even of the strongest faith, imagine what was really to be the grand characteristic of the century.

But it often happens, that the stirring up and agitation of men's minds by such causes, though fearful at the time, is the providential preparation for spiritual reformation, intellectual progress, and great social improvement. It was so in the early part of the present century. An impulse was then given to the human mind, that has been greatly felt in all the departments of science and art, in all the forms and conditions of social life, and perhaps most of all in the Christian church. Is it not remarkable what an influence this has had in stimulating and organizing the churches for religious effort? At all events it is certain, that a great change has come over the spirit and habits of God's people as a body. Practical piety is now a very different thing from what it once was,—more comprehensive in its views and feelings, more active, more benevolent and aggressive, more alive to its individual and social responsibilities, and a thousand times more influential, in the aggregate, than it was fifty years ago. Somehow, the denominational and social conscience can no longer sleep amid the groans of a perishing world. Somehow, the churches have been led into extensive systematic organizations for propagating the gospel at home and abroad, and these are gaining strength and momentum in every free Protestant community; and somehow, missionary institutions have been planted over a large portion of the heathen world, with the declared purpose of taking possession of the whole for Christ.

Such facts as these may well awaken our curios-

ity to look more deeply into the matter, and to learn more of the position, in which we as Christians and the churches of our day are placed by God's providence and grace ; and it shall be my object to illustrate this point, and to bring it out distinctly to view.

I. *It was not until the present century, that the way was actually opened, by God's providence, for Christians to reach and evangelize all nations.*

This truth, if it be one, has of course a momentous bearing on the responsibilities of the present generation. Christ's command to "go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature," does not prove that his immediate disciples, or the whole body of Christians in their day, were able themselves actually to publish the gospel to all mankind. In fact they did not. They did what they could. They are not open to reproach. They were faithful. Theirs was pre-eminently an enterprising, missionary age. It may well be presumed, that they proclaimed the gospel as far as they could. Though their number was so small, they preached it through a considerable portion of the then civilized world. But it is almost certain that they went scarcely beyond. Our Lord intended his injunction not merely for them, nor merely for their age, but for the whole church, in all ages, till the gospel should be literally preached to every creature, nay, till the end of the world ; for in the millennium the gospel will need to be preached every where, as really as now. It will then be, as it is now, the duty of the Christian church to see that it is so

preached; and this injunction of our Lord presents, and was intended to present, THE GREAT STANDING WORK of the Christian church for all ages of the world.

As the apostolic missions were nearly all within the limits of the civilized world, so were they doubtless restrained by the most formidable obstacles from going farther. We have certain knowledge, indeed, that at that time the Romans had almost no acquaintance with countries beyond their own empire. India was to them the farthest east, and the British Isles the farthest west. The immense regions of northern and eastern Asia had scarcely more existence in their minds, than the continents and islands of this western hemisphere. This ignorance, and much more the nature of its causes, made it impossible, as the primitive churches were situated, and as society and navigation then were, for the Apostles and their associates to publish the gospel throughout the world.

This profound ignorance of the existence and condition of distant nations continued for many centuries, and was to a great extent invincible. And so far as it was invincible, it was an insuperable obstacle to the universal preaching of the gospel. If not so, how came commerce, the insatiable greediness of commerce, to be restricted, all the while, within precisely the same limits? How came the reckless, indomitable avarice of the world not to break forth over all the earth, as it has done in our age even in advance of the gospel? It did not, only because it could not. Its progress was barred, in respect to the greater portion of the world, as it

now is in respect to the kingdom of Japan ; only the obstacles were far more numerous and insuperable.

It was, indeed, most obviously the divine will,—for all-wise reasons not fully revealed to us,—that the nations of the world should long remain in great measure isolated in respect to each other ; and that the visible Christian church should pass, meanwhile, through a period of trial, and through a series of great errors, apostacies and reformations, before it spread itself and the religion it professed over all the earth. These were probably needful to the full working out of the great plan of redemption, and to the full preparation of the church for this great work.

I by no means intend to affirm, that the true church of Christ has not, in every age since the Apostles, been culpable for not having done more than it actually did for extending the gospel. I speak, however, of the *true spiritual* church, and not of the merely nominal church, which early began to apostatize from the spirit and truth of the gospel, and the more as it rose in power and influence. And the question I raise concerning the *true* church, is not whether it could have done more in the way of missions than it did, but whether it could have diffused the gospel, in past ages, through the entire world.

There is the strongest historical proof, that the ignorance of the true Christian church in past ages, with respect to the great portion of the heathen world, admitted of but a partial removal. For many ages, the whole frontier of pagan Africa and Asia was occupied by Saracens and Turks, then

forming together the most powerful of all the nations, in armed and fierce defiance of Christian Europe. Goths, Huns, Vandals, and Saracens also disturbed for centuries the security and peace of Christendom. So did the Crusaders. Moreover the true church of Christ necessarily participated in the ignorance, mental imbecility and superstition of Christendom from the seventh century onward, which rendered impossible any such rational, scriptural and extended missions, as are necessary to evangelize the whole heathen world. The Pope and his cardinals were also in great power, and arrogated to themselves all the functions and privileges of the church of God, and allowed no religious freedom of mind, speech, or action; and the few scattered and feeble disciples of the Lord Jesus had more than they could do to stay the progress of superstition in the visible church. And oft-times they were compelled to wander in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth, and to purchase a mere existence by silence and obscurity. In such circumstances, which in fact lasted for ages, down even to the Reformation, the true church could do but little for the benefit of remote countries. Then what scanty facilities were there for traveling! For twelve centuries after the Apostles, men continued to regard the earth as an extended plain, and to sail by the stars and cling to the shores; and not till long after that, did the mariner boldly venture across the ocean. Mind too had no such mighty instruments to work with as now, for exerting influence on mind near or remote. The invention of the printing press preceded but a few

years the discovery of America ; and the use of machinery in working the press, or that wonderful machine called the power-press, which can print fifteen hundred or two thousand copies of the New Testament in a day, is a device of our own age. I need not add, that associations on a large scale for propagating the gospel, except in the form of monkish institutions, are all of recent date,—the result of that intelligence and large inter-community of thought and feeling and freedom of action, which belong to the age of printing, and distinguish the Protestant world of modern times. So far as the apostolical and later ancient churches were able to act together for the propagating of the gospel, it was by platoons and companies, while the evangelical churches of our day act by divisions and armies, with the momentum of great masses.

I think my brethren will by this time agree with me in the opinion, that not until the present generation did God's providence so open the way as to enable his people to reach and evangelize all nations.

But nothing is more certain, than that *now* almost every heathen nation is entirely accessible, and that this amazing result has been brought about chiefly within the past half-century,—in that silent, scarcely observed manner, which characterizes the great operations of God's providential government. Those who remember (as some of us do) the embarrassments, with which our own Board of Foreign Missions commenced its operations, forty years ago, will bear witness that I do not exaggerate. It was then thought difficult to find a field of labor even for four

or five missionaries. Little did our pious fathers think what God purposed to do for this work, even before some of them should have gone to their everlasting rest. Little did they imagine, for instance, how soon the world would be explored, and its condition made known to God's people ;—how soon the intolerant secular power of idolatry would be overthrown in India ;—how soon the gates of China would be forced open ;—how soon Protestant governments, then all indifferent and some even hostile to missions, would find it for their interest, as they have, to act the part of protectors ;—how soon rail-roads would bind the earth together, and send men over it by day and night with the swiftness of the winds ;—how soon thought would be darted across continents with the lightning's speed ;—and how soon the currents of all the rivers and the storms of all the oceans would be overcome by steam, and commerce fill and pervade every sea ; thus giving to the people of God a free and easy access to every land.

These astonishing events have all become so familiar, as scarcely to excite our wonder. But they are all events of our own age. They belong to the nineteenth century. For the first time since the opening of the Christian dispensation, for the first time since the dispersion at Babel, God has made a large portion of the world to cease from the strange isolation of its several parts, and to become known and accessible to his people. With our rail-roads, our steam-ships, our telegraphic wires, our power-presses, our commerce and commercial exchanges, our sciences and arts, our geography, our personal

security; with no more Gothic or Vandal invasions to drive back the tide of civilization; nor False Prophet, nor Man of Sin, as we may hope, again to deceive on the large scale of nations;—who can doubt, that the ‘fullness of the time’ for blessing the earth with the gospel has come, and that this great work forms the grand mission and business of the churches and Christians of our day?

This conviction will be strengthened by the illustrations under our second proposition.

II. *It was not until the present century, that the evangelical churches of Christendom were ever really organized with a view to the conversion of the world.*

What are called *voluntary associations* for religious purposes, in distinction from local churches, are not indeed a new thing on the earth. They have existed, in some form, from an early period of the Christian church. It was probably through such, that the gospel has ever been propagated by the church beyond the voices of its own immediate pastors. Monasteries were voluntary societies, and so were all the different orders of monks. It was by means of associations such as these, that the gospel was originally propagated among our ancestors, and over Europe. These are the *Papal* forms of missionary societies and missions.

The *Protestant* form is what we see in Missionary, Bible, Tract, and other kindred societies; not restricted to ecclesiastics, nor to any one profession, but combining all classes, embracing the masses the people, and all free, open, and responsible. They are voluntary associations in reality, whether

their executive officers be appointed by associations of Christians formed expressly for the purpose, or by means of particular ecclesiastical bodies; for it is *the contributors of the funds*, who are the real association; not the American Board, not the General Assembly's Board, nor any other, but the individuals, churches, congregations, who freely act together, through such agencies, for an object of common interest. The Board, or whatever be the executive body, is an agency, and stands so related to the donors on the one hand, and to the missionaries on the other. Those who employ it are all alike voluntary in so doing, in all the Protestant societies of benevolent organization. No compulsory taxation, no taxation whatever, is allowable in Christian benevolence. None are to be *taxed* for the *spread* of the gospel. All must needs be voluntary and free to give, and to determine what they shall give and for what objects, in order to be cheerful and accepted givers. Our age is singular and remarkable for its disposition to associate in action. It associates for the accomplishment of almost every object; and this disposition may be so extended, for an object of great interest, that the society shall embrace even thousands of churches belonging to several kindred denominations. We see such wonders in our times, in Bible and Tract societies, and even in Missionary societies. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions is itself an instance. But whatever the name, constitution, or religious object of the association, the action put forth is as much that of churches as it can be on so large a scale, or perhaps as it ought to be when

involving the receipt and disbursement of large sums of money.

This Protestant form of association,—free, open, responsible, embracing all classes, both sexes, all ages, the masses of the people,—is peculiar to modern times, and almost to our age. Like our own form of government, working with perfect freedom over a broad continent, it is among the great results of the progress of Christian civilization in this ‘fullness of the time’ for the world’s conversion. Such great and extended associations could not possibly have been worked, they could not have been created, or kept in existence, without the present degree of civil and religious liberty and social security, or without the present extended habits of reading and the consequent wide-spread intelligence among the people; nor could they exist on a sufficiently broad scale nor act with sufficient energy for the conversion of the world, under despotic governments, or without the present amazing facilities for communication on the land, and the world-wide commerce on the seas. Never until now, did the social condition of mankind render it possible to organize and sustain the armies requisite for the world’s spiritual conquest.

Such new forms of association as have been described arose with the opening of the unevangelized world to the gospel, and with the consequent rise of the missionary spirit; and I believe that every evangelical denomination in Protestant America and Europe now has them. They belong almost exclusively to this century. In our own country indeed, fifty years ago, there was not one Foreign Missionary society, properly so called, nor a Bible, Tract, Edu-

cation, or Seamen's society; and the Home Missionary societies were mere local institutions working on the smallest scale. But now our system of organization for propagating the gospel at home and abroad, receives contributions to the amount of a million and a half of dollars annually; besides half a million more for the sale of Bibles and other religious books at cost. In the evangelical churches of Great Britain and America, the aggregate of the receipts is about five millions of dollars; or at least a hundred times more than was contributed, by the same bodies of Christians, fifty years ago.

III. *Till the present century, the evangelical churches of Christendom had no commanding system of missions abroad, designed expressly for the conversion of the world.*

At the opening of the present century, a few missions, mostly of recent origin, might be seen faintly twinkling out from the depths of pagan darkness. But they were feebly sustained, had gained no strong hold on the heathen world, and awakened no general interest among the churches. Never did any age, not even the apostolical, behold such a system of missions as we are now permitted to see. They are not indeed universal, for some portions of the world are as yet scarcely accessible. But the Christian traveler would find them on nearly all the more important points along two thousand miles of the African coast; in nearly every important centre of influence in Western Asia; on the upper waters of the Indus; along the Ganges; around nearly the whole sea-coast of India, and over nearly

the length and breadth of its great peninsula. He would find them in Ceylon, in Assam, in Siam, in the Indian Archipelago, and in the five chief ports of the Chinese empire. Launching abroad on the Pacific, he might venture to cast anchor in almost any of the groups of islands, in the confidence that missionaries of the cross are there to protect him from savage men; and already do Christian missions afford a more effectual and better protection to the mariner in that "Island World," than could be furnished by all the navies of Christendom. And along the great rivers of our western wilds, after crossing the Rocky Mountains, how often would the traveler be gladdened at evening by the songs of Zion, when fearing he should hear the war-cry of the savage!

Though all this be but the *beginning* of the enterprise for the world's conversion, (and it is nothing more,) yet how great is that beginning!—how wide!—in how many places!—how extended over the earth! You find the heralds of the cross alike in the burning and temperate zones, in every climate; encountering every form of barbarism, every language, every religion; and laboring, with equal cheerfulness, in every part of the unevangelized world.

Nor are these missionaries laboring in vain. Theirs, through God's blessing, is one of the most successful great enterprises that was ever undertaken by man. Look at the Sandwich Islands. Look at the long line of island-groups in the South Pacific. Look at New Zealand. Behold, in the Cherokee and Choctaw nations, the "wild Indian"

both civilized and christianized. Behold in Western Asia, the two religious reformations now in progress, among the Armenians and the Nestorians. Behold in Africa, West and South, the many thousands gathered into churches. Behold the increasing number of Christian villages in India—germs of coming Christian provinces, and of a Christian empire. Behold the multitude of schools, the seminaries, the native preachers, the printing establishments. Behold the hundred and twenty languages of the pagan world lately reduced to writing, and beginning to be enriched with the Scriptures, and with school-books and religious tracts. Behold at least a thousand churches, with two or three hundred thousand members, enjoying the ministrations of some fifteen hundred foreign missionaries and thousands of native Christian helpers. Behold, in Christian lands, thousands of feeble churches edified by nearly as many home missionaries. Behold near forty millions of Scriptures issued by Bible societies—a greater number than ever before since the Law was given on Sinai; and thousands of millions of tracts and religious books issued by Tract and Sabbath-school societies.

Did time permit, I might speak of the impulse that has thus been given to our religious education, to our religious literature, to our devotional and practical piety, to our churches and ecclesiastical bodies, and to all our evangelical denominations. I might show how this vastly extended benevolent enterprise has raised the character of the Christian church, and secured for

it a consideration among men such as it never had before. But there is not time, and what has been adduced is sufficient for my purpose. Enough for me that the world is so far opened, and that the churches are beginning in earnest to gird themselves for the great spiritual conflict in every land.

Now how do you account for all this? What does it mean? Why, within the memory of many now living, has the world been thus strangely opened and made accessible, as by a stupendous miracle? And why has such a vast systematic organization grown up as in a day, of associations at home and missions abroad, with the specific and declared design of publishing the gospel to every creature? Was there ever such a thing before? *Why* has the great and blessed God crowded so many of such stupendous results into our day?

I am unable to answer these inquiries, except on the supposition that the “*fullness* of the time” has actually come for the predicted publication and spread of the gospel through the world. I am sure that they cannot be answered on any other supposition. There never has been an age like the present. Never did churches, or individual Christians, or any man with the gospel in his hands, stand in such a relation to the heathen world, as we now do. Not only is that world accessible, but it even lies on our very borders. We cannot sympathize with Richard Baxter, in his almost despairing hope that the time *might* come when the gospel should have access to the Orient; for with us, hope has given place to certainty, and every man, woman and child may now

operate, with the greatest ease, upon the most distant nations. Men sometimes complain of the frequency and urgency of the calls that are made on their religious benevolence. But do they not see, that the most urgent of these calls result necessarily from the character which God has impressed on our age, and from the relation we stand in to the surrounding world? Our fathers of the last century had no such calls upon them, as we have from nations beyond the bounds of Christendom; and they had not, because those nations were then comparatively unknown, or unapproachable. But God has been pleased, in our day, to lift the pall of death from off the heathen world, and to bring it near, and to fill our eyes with the sight and our ears with the cry of their distress. He has leveled the mountains and bridged the oceans, which separated the benighted nations from us, and has made for us highways to every land. To *us* he says, "*Go!*"—with an emphasis and a meaning, such as this command never had to ministers and Christians in former ages.

Should we take the wings of the morning, and fly millions of leagues beyond our globe, we could by no means thus escape from the responsibility that has come upon us; for we know our duty, and we can never be as though we had not known it. We should be held and treated, wherever found by ministering angels, as deserters from the army of the Lord of hosts. God's Word and Spirit and Providence now all concur in the command to publish the gospel to all the nations; and if we refuse, the blood of perishing nations will cry against us. This is the age for the work, and we are the people to do it.

From this warfare Christ will give us no discharge. It by no means follows, that we shall be saved in the neglect of this work, because our fathers were. Our circumstances differ wholly from theirs. Western Asia, India, China, were shut to them, but are open to us. Neither had God been pleased to teach them, as he has us, to associate and combine their strength and act in masses for the accomplishment of great religious enterprises.

Verily it is no transient opinion, nor mere popular sentiment, accidentally arisen and liable to pass away, that has put forth and sustains the missionary work. It is the onward, almost fearful progress of God's gracious providence. As long as there is liberty of thought, speech and action, a free press, an advancing civilization, and an unshackled, universal commerce, we may be sure that the motives to prosecute the missionary work will continue to increase in their manifold power upon the hearts, consciences and conduct of the Christian church. No one can doubt this, who knows the circumstances that marked the rise, progress and decline of all past missions of the church, or who takes a comprehensive view of this 'fullness of the time' for the grand spiritual renovation of the world. These mighty beginnings of the past half-century will have glorious developments in the half-century to come; and the children will have far more to do and will do far more, than their fathers did or supposed they could do.

The idea that the ability of the churches to give is already fully tasked, comes from a profound ignorance of the statistics of our religious charities.

Nearly one-half of the three millions of professedly evangelical church-members in our country are believed yet to give nothing at all for missions, foreign or domestic. Nearly a third, even in New England, are believed to give nothing; and very many, even in our own denomination, contribute not more than half a dollar a year for propagating the gospel; which is at the rate of twenty-five dollars in half a century! Or, if twice this sum, it would be but fifty dollars during a long, long life time!—and for the object that brought the Son of God on his mission from Heaven to earth! Are these *faithful* stewards? Will *they* hear the heaven-creating words “*Well done!*” addressed to them on the great day, by the Judge on the throne?

I am not pleading specially for any one missionary society, nor for any one class of missions, nor for the millions of any one nation or continent. I stand on higher, broader ground. I am pleading for the general cause of missions and of the gospel. I am pleading for the world; in view of the length, breadth, depth, and height of the love of Christ, and of our obligations to him. Is this a work we may do, or not do? Is it to be reckoned among mere human enterprises? Can we neglect it, and think calmly of our neglect in our dying day?

Let us get the full impress of our duty. Let us awake to its great reality. Nothing is more truly binding upon us, than the obligation to impart the gospel to those whom we can reach, and who will perish if they do not receive it. That surely is the most destructive immorality, which withholds from immortal man the only gospel of salvation. The most

pernicious infidelity is surely that, which cares not for a world perishing in sin. And that must be the most high-handed disregard of Heaven's authority, and must reflect most dishonor upon the Son of God, which refuses, in the face of his most explicit command, to publish his gospel to every creature. Let us remember, that He who requires this is our God, in whose hands are our possessions, our lives, and our immortal souls, and that our opportunities are rushing by us and fast passing away forever !

NOTE.—As a few readers may perceive a resemblance, in some portions of the foregoing discussion, to an anonymous article in the "Religious Magazine" some twelve or thirteen years ago, it is proper to say that both originated from the same source.

